

Noorjehan is no more but her songs will continue to enchant one and all

By Ambarish Mishra
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MUMBAI: Noorjehan, the singing sensation who passed away in Karachi on Saturday, will be long remembered for her songs which soothed the frayed nerves of the Indian sub-continent for nearly five decades.



Noorjehan

Her mellifluous voice will rise above the bang-bang of cross-border firing and her 20,000-plus, Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi numbers will never cease to be a part of the rich cultural heritage shared by the two star-crossed neighbours.

Noorjehan had a phenomenal fan following which cut a swathe across nations and languages in the sub-continent. The Asians only gathering of music buffs, who attended a Noorjehan concert at the Royal Albert hall in London a few years ago, went into ecstasy as the singer belted out her popular numbers 'Shaala Jawaaniyaan Maane', 'Tum hum ko bhula baithe ho' and 'Aawaaz de kahaan hai,' the last mentioned being the haunting Naushad Ali composition.

"Noorjehan was gifted with a voice that was pure as crystal and transparent. She had 'noor' (light) in her voice. Secondly, she could express a wide range of emotions. That Noorjehan sang my compositions is a singular honour to me," said renowned music director Naushad Ali under whose baton Noorjehan sang, and acted too, in Mehboob Khan's 'Anmol Ghadi'.

Naushadsaab remembers the unusual request which singer-actor Surendra Nath came up with during the recording of 'Aawaaz de kahaan hai', a Noorjehan-Surendra duet from 'Anmol Ghadi'. "In those days, there used to be a single microphone which the duet singers had to share. I stood Noorjehan bang opposite Surendra Nath. After a few rehearsals, Surendrababu requested me to ask Noorjehan to turn away her face after singing her lines. Charged as she was with emotions, Noorjehan's facial expression distracted

Surendrababu," Nausahdsaab recalled, adding, "today's playback singers lack this honesty, this intensity."

Born in Punjab (of undivided India) in October 1925, Noorjehan joined the magical world of glamour and grease-paint in Calcutta. She was a child artiste in films such as 'Misr ka Sitaara', 'Taaranhaar' and 'Faqr-e-Islam'. Later, she returned to Lahore and goaded by her elder sister Mumtaaz, she joined Dalsukh Pancholi's film company.

While she honed her vocal skills under the supervision of Ustaad Ghulam Mohammad, Noorjehan's mentor was Master Ghulam Haider, the maverick music director who is largely remembered for having altered the music scene with his rustic Punjabi 'theka.'

Lata Mangeshkar, India's heartthrob, too can trace the origin of her musical genius to Master Ghulam Haider who, after he migrated to Mumbai in the mid-1940s, chose Lata to sing his ditties in 'Majboor', among other films.

'Khaandaan', sutured with Master Ghulam Haider's lilting numbers, brought instant stardom to Noorjehan. Elated with success, she married Shauqat Hussain Rizvi who directed 'Khaandaan'. When Noorjehan reached Mumbai—in search of career opportunities, of course—with her husband, 'Khaandaan', the Lahore flick, was being toasted by Mumbai.

In Mumbai, Noorjehan acted in films such as 'Naadaan', 'Naukar', 'Dost', 'Chacha-Bhatija', 'Laal Haveli', 'Zeenat', 'Anmol Ghadi', and 'Jugnu'. As a singing actress, she surpassed her predecessors such as Devika Rani, Khursheed and Kanan Devi in popularity and critical acclaim. Her songs such as 'Bulbul mat ro yahaan', 'Yet kaun hansa, kisne sitaaron ko hansaya', 'Baithee hoon teri yaad ka saharaa le kar', 'Diya jalakar aap bujhaaya', 'Tum hum ko bhoola baithe ho', 'Mere bachpan ke saathi mujhe bhool na jaana', 'Aa intezaar hai tera' and 'Jawaan hai muhabbat, haseen hai zamaana' provided a healing touch to an India torn by communal strife, yet perched on the threshold of freedom.

Noorjehan may have chosen to cross the barbed-wire border after partition, but memories of Mumbai continued to haunt her. She visited Mumbai in 1981 to participate in 'Mortal Men, Immortal Melodies', a musical extravaganza, hosted by Bollywood. With Sardar Akhtar (Mehboob's wife) in tow, she visited her Chowpatty residence of the 1940s and, fighting back tears, went around the flat.

At producer-director B.R. Chopra's Santa Cruz office, she met her old friends—thespian Dilip Kumar, Pran, Naushad, Suraiyya and Sardar Akhtar—and wept. She also cooked at Dilip Kumar's Bandra residence and sang 'Awaaz de kahaan hai' at the show in Shanmukhananda hall. Dilip Kumar had played the male lead opposite Noorjehan in 'Jugnu'.

Recalling Noorjehan's Mumbai visit, renowned singer-actress Suraiyya said, "Nobody can match Noorjehan-ji's musical genius. As a person, she was warm and affectionate. 'Suraiyya remembered how Noorjehan would rag her for not having married 'even once'." "She would tell me—"Look, I married four time. Why couldn't you get at least one husband for yourself," said Suraiyya—who acted with Noorjehan in 'Anmol Ghadi'.

Melody queen Lata Mangeshkar has paid rich tributes to Noorjehan. As a teenaged artiste in Master Vinayak's Kolhapur-based film company in the mid-1940s, Lata was swept off her feet by Noorjehan who was signed up by Master Vinayak for his film 'Badi Maa'. "Noorjehan treated me with affection. To me, she was like an elder sister. I remember her with a sense of deep gratitude," said Lata, in a message from Kolhapur, the city where she first set her eyes on her icon.

Said well known music director Khayyam: "Noorjehan-ji's voice could echo the mood of the song with exceptional ease. She would embellish a song with 'harkat' and 'murki'. Thus, the entire composition was turned into an exquisite work of art". Saying this, a visibly moved Khayyam crooned several of his Noorjehan favourites, lacing each 'mukhda' with unalloyed praise for the fabled singer.